

**To: City Executive Board**

**Date: 11 February 2016**

**Report of: Housing Panel (Panel of the Scrutiny Committee)**

**Title of Report: Private Sector Housing Policy 2016-2019**

### **Summary and Recommendations**

**Purpose of report:** To present recommendations of the Housing Panel on the Private Sector Housing Policy 2016-2019

**Scrutiny Lead Member:** Councillor Craig Simmons

**Executive lead members:** Councillor Bob Price, Leader and Board Member for Regulation and Licensing of Private Rented Sector

**Recommendation** of the Housing Panel to the City Executive Board:

**That the City Executive Board states whether it agrees or disagrees with the five recommendations set out in the body of this report.**

### **Introduction**

1. The Housing Panel pre-scrutinised the Private Sector Housing Policy 2016-2019 decision at its public meeting on 1 February 2016. The Panel would like to thank Ian Wright and Mike Browning for introducing the report supporting a lengthy and productive discussion.

### **Summary and recommendation**

2. The Panel heard that Oxford had a relatively high proportion of private rented accommodation and relatively low levels of owner-occupation. In an otherwise deregulatory era, Government was strengthening the regulation of this sector. The new private sector housing policy sat under the Council's Housing Strategy and the Panel supported the general approach taken.
3. The Panel asked a wide range of questions, including about; how the Council can identify other properties owned by landlords, whether more could be done to

return empty properties to use, what was being done to address the issue of beds in sheds and how any priority area for the selected licensing of non-HMO private rented sector accommodation would be evaluated. The Panel heard that the Council would need permission to introduce a selective licensing scheme covering more than 20% of the geographical area of the city. Any assessment of priority areas for selective licensing would be based on how best to maximise the stock that would be covered by the scheme, as well as the volumes of service requests and reports of anti-social behaviour in different parts of the city. Ideally the sector would pay for its own regulation, as happens with HMO licensing.

4. The Panel considered the list of stakeholders to be consulted with and suggest this should also include Parish Councils and a new lease-holders forum.

***Recommendation 1 – That direct invitations to comment should be sent to Parish Councils and any lease-holders forums, in addition to the stakeholders listed in the report.***

5. The Panel questioned how tenants in the private rented sector would be encouraged to engage in the consultation and heard that this was a challenge with the exception of students as private rented sector tenants were disparate and not formally organised in groups. To capture more potential respondents, the Panel suggest that the Council should promote the consultation through channels such as the Your Oxford newsletter. The Panel also suggest that an appreciative inquiry could be used to explore how the Council can overcome barriers to participation and ensure the best response from private rented sector tenants.

***Recommendation 2 – That the consultation should be promoted through channels such as the Your Oxford newsletter and that further consideration should be given to how the Council can best engage with private rented sector tenants, perhaps through an ‘appreciative enquiry’.***

6. The Panel noted that the Council’s primary focus to date had been on regulating the houses in multiple occupation (HMO) market. The Panel questioned the links and information sharing between the HMO enforcement and planning enforcement teams and found that while some checks were in place, the Council could not legally refuse a HMO license application on the basis that planning permission had not been sought or granted. Refusals could only be based on the condition of the property and a fit and proper person test.
7. The Panel questioned what could be done to address the issue of rubbish or bulky items being left outside HMOs, for example when students vacate these properties at the end of term. The Panel heard that there were various enforcement options the Council could use, including serving a notice on the landlord to remove items within 7 days and the option of works in default, where the Council could remove the items and bill the landlord. In the event that the landlord then refused to pay, a charge could be held against the property until such a time as it was sold. The Panel suggest that the Council should make fuller use of these powers.

***Recommendation 3 – That the Council should make fuller use of the powers available to it to enforce the removal of waste and bulky items left outside HMO properties.***

8. The Panel had previously recommended that additional free bulky item collections should be made available to address the iniquity whereby many tenants living in HMOs are unable to access any free bulky waste collections. The Panel suggest that an update should be provided on the feasibility of implementing this recommendation, including the feasibility of offering three free bulky items collections on a 'per household' rather than a 'per property' basis.

***Recommendation 4 – That Council Officers are asked to provide an update on the feasibility of increasing the number of free bulky items collections available to tenants living in HMOs. This should include the feasibility of offering free bulky items collections on a 'per household' rather than 'per property' basis.***

9. The Panel questioned how residents could report an unlicensed HMOs or an HMO in poor repair and heard that this facility was available online. The Panel suggest that HMO reporting could be promoted through Tenants in Touch.

***Recommendation 5 – That the facility to report suspected unlicensed HMOs should be promoted more widely, including through Tenants in Touch.***

#### **Further consideration**

10. The Panel will scrutinise a refresh of the Council's Empty Property Strategy and will have the opportunity to scrutinise the Private Sector Housing Strategy again following the public consultation.

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**List of background papers: None**  
**Version number: 1.0**

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